



Leisure/Loisir

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rloi20>

Sports, religion and disability, by Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker

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Published online: 26 Aug 2015.



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To cite this article: Gervais Deschênes (2015) Sports, religion and disability, by Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, Leisure/Loisir, 39:1, 159-162, DOI: [10.1080/14927713.2015.1074396](https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2015.1074396)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2015.1074396>

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ambivalence, success, and failure. Pavlidis and Fullagar have produced a book which captures this multiplicity of experience to provide an interesting account of a particularly complex, current, gendered leisure practice.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2015.1074395>

Sports, religion and disability, by Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker,
London/New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2015, 238 pp., CAN\$183/
US\$150/£96 (hardback), ISBN 13: 978-0-415-71415-0

To be disabled is tragic enough but also to be
excluded totally from the pleasures of physical
recreation and sport is to be doubly unfortunate.

Sir Roger Gilbert Bannister
(first official sub-four minute mile run record holder)

This amazing textbook provides many fruitful connections between sports, religion, and disability with contributions from 14 methodical academicians. Primarily, this artefact should be considered within the orbits of a practical theology of disability and sports endeavours. These authors draw their discourses from their personal experiences which create many deeply hopeful meanings for those who are in search of answers. Persons with any sort of disability are often faced with these difficult theological and existential investigations: “Why me? (Howe & Parker, p. 34) Why was I spared? What is my purpose? How should I live my life? (cf. Green, p. 80) How far are we really willing to go for the ideal of equality? Do we really believe in the dignity and beauty and sacred equality of all?” (Shriver, p. 210). The historical context of this textbook took root with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games where religious and spiritual persons gathered together. It must be emphasized here that the Special Olympics Movement is surprising in its influence around the world. It groups more than 805,000 volunteers, 244,000 coaches, 500,000 officials, and organizes 44,136 international and regional competition events each year (cf. Watson; Shriver) despite the tendency by some normal citizens who might neglect to look carefully at this discrete phenomenon.

The textbook is well balanced with the following contents: Citation Information; Preface by Joni Eareckson Tada; Chapter 1 – “Special Olympians as a ‘prophetic sign’ to the modern sporting Babel” by Nick J. Watson”; Chapter 2 – “Disability as a path to spiritual enlightenment: an ethnographic account of the significance of religion in Paralympic sport” by P. David Howe and Andrew Parker; Chapter 3 – “Running the (special) race: new (Pauline) perspectives on disability and theology of sport” by Amos Yong; Chapter 4–“Towards a theology of disability sport: a misconstrued game plan” by Graeme Watts; Chapter 5 – “The experience of spirituality and disability sport for

British military personal traumatically injured in Iraq and Afghanistan: an interpretative phenomenological analysis” by Sarah Green; Chapter 6 – “Nature-based recreation, spirituality, and persons with disabilities” by Paul Heintzman; Chapter 7 – “Researching religion, disability, and sport: reflections and possibilities” by Andrew Parker and Nick J. Watson; Chapter 8 – “‘Celebration’ as the spiritual expression of leisure and sport: reflections on the L’Arche tradition and the Special Olympics” by Nick J. Watson and Catherine O’Keefe; Chapter 9 – “A modern conception of flesh: towards a theology of disability sport” by Peter M. Hopsicker; Chapter 10 – “A postcolonial approach to understanding sport-based empowerment of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Zambia: the case of the cultural philosophy of Ubuntu/Oscar Mwaanga and Davies Banda”; Chapter 11 – “Radical orthodoxy and the emergence of spiritual hero-athletes: examining Lance Armstrong’s ‘illness’ narrative” by Andrew R. Meyer and Nick J. Watson; Chapter 12 – “Meet my exes: theological reflections on disability and Paralympic sport – a continuum of ephemeral deaths and eternal resurrection” by Stuart Braye; Chapter 13 – “Triumph from anguish: the inspiration of the Special Olympics” by Timothy Shriver; Chapter 14 – “Christianity, sport and disability: a case study of the role of long-distance running in the life of a father and his son who is congenitally blind and has profound intellectual disabilities” by Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker and finally the Index.

This new athletic movement within the post-secular era is considered as a brotherhood fashion. To that trend, Watts conveys that “people with a disability are often regarded as disadvantaged, sometimes as inferior, not only physically, but socially, and even spiritually. From a spiritual point of view, this reaction has led to disability being linked to moral imperfection, as a punishment for sin, as a test of faith, or an opportunity for redemption through suffering” (p. 59). There is a small portion of disabled persons who really succeed in overcoming the barriers of prejudice and the stereotypes that unfortunately predominantly stigmatize this vulnerable population. The textbook reveals instead a cosmology of the sacred where people, as “analogon”, act like demi-gods in a sort of woeful nihilistic world. We think about the hero model and cyclist athlete Lance Armstrong, who is a cancer survivor, where the “illness narrative perpetuated this image of a fabricated idol, a figure that falsely provided a theologically empty social world with spiritual fulfillment” (Meyer & Watson, 2015, p. 189). Thus, in a culture of the death of God, most citizens replace Him by idols in an overproduction and overconsumption society. In turn, the Special Olympics Movement “are one prophetic sign to the multi-billion dollar business of sport, which it has been argued is a major edifice in the modern ‘Tower of Babel’ alongside other cultural idols, such as scientism, healthism, intellectualism, unhealthy perfectionism, commercialism, and materialism” (Watson, 2015, p. 1); these last dimensions encourage in the long run the harmful “cult of normalcy”. The babel prides originate from the manifestation of narcissistic attitudes hidden in each of us which shape more or less the whole of humanity. Most disabled athletes cultivate vigorously a personal God in their sport milieu, understood mainly as a quasi-religion according to the radical orthodoxy academicians. From that specific viewpoint, Special Olympic athletes are giving consciously or unwittingly their broken sacrifice body for the glory and the worship of God. It is then possible to suggest that the teachings of Jesus Christ are a millennium habitus that contribute to portray the cultural capital of sport and leisure through the traits of personality of these Special Olympian athletes who search for excellence in spite of the win-at-all-costs ethos and their profound desire to be loved for what they are intrinsically: the Sons and the Daughters of the Heavenly Father. Nevertheless, in accordance with Braye’s tightly bound theological reflections,

we learn for instance with stupefaction that the mentally ill have been seen in the past – and still always for certain closed minded and enslaving people – as a nuisance factor through history, and that they were ironically even persecuted brutally by the Christians themselves in the early history of Christianity because they were perceived as evil and dangerous persons, to be eliminated or excluded from regular social life.

The Special Olympics Movement transmits several shared core values: “fair play, respect, physical and emotional strength, perseverance, subordination, obedience, loyalty, cooperation, self-control, endurance” (Howe & Parker, 2015, p. 29). To this end, this firm value clarification allows the regeneration and consolidation of the social world and the communities. Shriver purports a motivation disquisition through the eye of love for a renewed vision of equality: “[w]e follow Isaiah who exhorted his readers to care and service with the promise that in healing divisions, darkness would become like noonday. We follow Jesus who rejected all hierarchies of power and value and invited his followers to ‘love one another’. We follow the Prophet Mohammed in his exhortation to live in peace with all, especially those with disabilities. We follow the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh who teaches the eight-fold path as a way to selfness kindness. We follow the Hindu tradition that invites preferential treatment for the vulnerable” (p. 213). In that sense, within an interdisciplinary approach, Watson and O’Keefe make some suitable links and rich meanings of celebration with the perspective of leisure and sport, with crucial reference to many embodied experiences, such as fun, joy, belonging, festivity, laughter and play, as explained in the writings of the founder of L’Arche spirituality, Jean Vanier and other academicians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Henry Nouwen and John Hull. This thoughtful aspect of L’Arche spirituality is a deep inspiration for the Special Olympics Movement, and even beyond. Furthermore, Watson and Parker effectively provide a theological reflection particularly about the heartbreaking life story of a father (John Courtney), the wife and mother (Sylvia Courtney) and their fostered son (James Hughes), who was born congenitally blind – without eyes – and suffered from an intellectual disability. These authors show that in spite of these severe handicaps, the deep love of James’s foster father and mother permitted him to run over 40 marathons and miscellaneous long-run races. This is a truthful life trajectory that shows that “sports properly understood and played can (and should) act as a vehicle for the holistic care, growth, development and enrichment of the lives of those with disabilities” (Watson & Parker, 2015, p. 229). Thus, sport is a key to successfully gaining respectability for the vulnerable population expecting self-esteem and adapted quality of life.


The other authors (Yong; Heintzman; Mwaanga & Banda; Hopsisker) generously provide their own doctrinal visions about the empowerment of sports and nature-based recreation for people with any sort of disability. This is implicated inescapably in the legitimacy of the diversity in the human manifestations of “flesh” as expressed by St. Paul who states that the body is the Temple of God, and as such, the need to accept his/her physical finiteness and spiritual boundaries. The aim is not to empower once and for all disabled persons within their hyper-individualistic interests, but rather to facilitate empowerment with the support of the cultural tools that are at the vulnerable population’s disposal, in order for them to be healthy and happy in what they are doing among their daily routines and for them to catch up with their inner lives for a second chance.

Generally speaking, this textbook is a wise and propitious introduction to the human disabilities wilderness. These authors succeed in demonstrating adequately the need to go further step by step, not only about thinking but by intervening

directly and sufficiently for the survival of the Special Olympics Movement, with the scope of a philosophy of action, where the disabled persons are primarily involved through their spirituality pursuit. These academicians have the courageousness and the authentic sensitivity to defend disabled persons so that this group of citizens can inclusively build up their nearest environment and also other social spaces. Without any doubt this valuable textbook will contribute in the near future to the construction of a better world where it is worth to live together within a blessed spiritual well-being which recreates meanings-of-life benefits and personal growth for all citizens.

Acknowledgement

My genuine thanks to Dr Karl Spracklen for his precious contribution in the revision of this review.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2015.1074396>

The global horseracing industry: social, economic, environmental and ethical perspectives, by Phil McManus, Glenn Albrecht and Raewyn Graham, Abingdon, UK, Routledge, 2013, 256 pp., CAN\$140/£85, ISBN 9780415677318 (hardback), CAN\$52.95/£28.99, ISBN 9780415633246 (paperback)

Thoroughbred horseracing is a global industry with a rich and long history, and one that contributes economically and socially to local, regional and national societies, yet there has been relatively little social science research on this topic. McManus, Albrecht and Graham's book is thus a welcome contribution to the field and provides the reader with a broad overview of this unusual industry that is at once sport, business and passion. The title of the book reveals the authors' ambitious project, to consider the "global" nature of racing from a variety of different perspectives. To do this, they concentrate on a number of interrelated themes: the "players" (horses and people), racing as an industry, the role of racing in the creation and marketing of places and landscapes, and the ethical challenges associated with this unusual practice which requires close interaction between human and equine actors. The book thus covers a lot of ground and provides the reader with an overview of many of the joys, challenges and ethical problems associated with Thoroughbred racing.

The majority of the fieldwork and case study examples presented are based within Australia's Hunter Valley region and Kentucky in the US, two key locations in the Thoroughbred industry. With some limited consideration of other markets and places (such as Newmarket, UK and Singapore), the "global" focus may appear geographically limited, yet the authors deftly illustrate the ways that "the Thoroughbred" becomes a vector for transmitting and sharing attitudes, practices and ideas throughout the horseracing industry beyond geographic boundaries. McManus, Albrecht and Graham present "the Thoroughbred" as a being somewhere between nature and